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ABSTRACT

The increased visibility of lesbian and gay texts can be considered analogous to and preparatory to the increasing visibility of lesbian and gay people. Students who read about and discuss homosexuality may produce writings which reflect resistance to subject matter but also sensitivity to the relationships which the works studied described. Both the selection and arrangement of texts construct a reality which students experience and contemplate. As such, teachers must ask themselves what kind of world they are creating. To construct a reality which represents the diversity of the culture, instructors must include representations of gay and lesbian life. The choice of texts will influence the nature of student responses to lesbians and gay men. An assimilationist approach (which suggests that homosexuals are "just like" the reader) will only highlight the ordinariness (hetereosexualness) of the homosexual, while the goal should be to celebrate the diversity of the differing lifestyle. (SG)

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Teaching the Literature of Lesbian and Gay Experience: An Assimilationist View

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The title of this paper is "Teaching the Literature of Lesbian and Gay Experience: An Assimilationist View," but the subtitle, "An Assimilationist View," is misleading. When I proposed this paper I intended to argue for a teaching plan that would foreground the similarities of lesbian and gay experience and straight experience, a plan that would move a predominantly straight student community to recognize that lesbians and gay men do not come from another planet. My original goal was to promote a kind of syllabus which would include not lesbian literature, gay literature, and straight literature--but just literature.

Since then I have come to understand that such an assimilationist position is limited and potentially dangerous. This is not to say that I totally reject curricular assimilation --but I do not totally accept it either. One of the things I hope to do in this paper is to trace the development of my thoughts during the last year and a half about this assimilationist view and to explain why I now believe such an approach to be problematic. I won't be answering many questions but I'll be asking quite a few. Before I go any further, I think I should define "Assimilation." Here is the raw physiological definition for us to keep in mind as we reflect on these sometimes theoretical issues: "Assimilation is the change of

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digested food into the protoplasm of an animal." And now allow me to take you back a year and a half to when I decided to bring lesbian and gay literature into the classroom.

When I was asked to teach "Man and Woman in Literature" at the University of Massachusetts, I was delighted to have an opportunity to discuss in the classroom issues of gender and sexuality which were central to my graduate research. As I was choosing texts for the course, I knew that I would include at least one lesbian or gay narrative. I did this for a number of reasons: Because I am a gay man, I am especially committed to discussing with my students the variety of human affections and relationships. I also believe that lesbian and gay students need to read literary representations of "their" lives and to see these texts valued and treated seriously in the Academy. Furthermore, I believe that the increasing visibility of lesbian and gay texts can be analogous to--and preparatory to--the increasing visibility of lesbian and gay people. Texts can come out of the closet, too.

Knowing that the course was a part of the Social and Cultural Diversity Component, I felt confident that my decision would meet with no resistance. This University-wide component reaches beyond the perspectives of mainstream American culture and the Western tradition in an attempt to encourage an appreciation of pluralistic norms, values, and perspectives. The official definition of the Component includes a list of racial and ethnic minorities to consider and concludes with this statement: "Since a sensitivity to social and cultural diversity

is advanced by an understanding of the dynamics of power in modern societies, courses that focus on the differential life experiences of women outside the mainstream of American culture, minorities outside the mainstream of American culture, and the poor also come within the scope of this requirement." Although this statement does not explicitly identify lesbians and gay men, I was quick to recognize myself in that phrase, "minorities outside the mainstream of American culture." And after all, the course isn't called "Heterosexuality in Literature."

I soon discovered, however, that I had a broader definition of "social and cultural diversity" than other teachers of this course. Of the 15 people (graduate students, part-time instructors, and faculty) teaching "Man and Woman in Literature," four chose texts concerned with lesbian or gay experience, and two of those texts--D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox* and "The Prussian Officer"--belong to the "I Thought People Like that Killed Themselves" genre. Obviously, the oblique language of the official definition of "diversity" allowed most teachers to avoid discussions of lesbian and gay experience. The university--even in one of its most liberal statements--kept lesbians and gay men invisible. And the teachers preserved that invisibility.

However disillusioned I was by the institutional disregard for lesbians and gay men, as well as by my colleagues' willingness to avoid what they considered "a very difficult subject," I planned my course and ordered my books and wrote my syllabus--determined to challenge the heterosexism I saw all around me. Included among the short fiction in my course were

Jane Rule's "The Day I Don't Remember," and David Leavitt's "Territory"; the novel I chose was Stephen McCauley's *The Object of My Affection*.

My course description, as it appears on my syllabus, states: "Reading novels, plays, and short stories, we will examine how several writers of different racial, ethnic, and sexual affiliations understand the meanings of words like 'masculine,' 'feminine,' 'romance,' 'marriage,' 'gay,' 'straight,' and 'family.'" I was confident that this accurately described what we would do in the course. And we did discuss masculinity, femininity, romance, marriage, and family for 11 weeks--and then, in the last three weeks we talked about "gay." That creation of a "gay unit" was one of the biggest mistakes I made.

In an informal writing, one of my students commented: "I have liked and enjoyed much of what we have read in this class but I can see right now . . . I'm going to have a hard time reading this stuff." This student perceived that the two short stories and the novel scheduled for the last three weeks of the course were different from everything else in the course. They were different from everything else in the course because I had made them different. I had marginalized those texts--just as surely as lesbians and gay men are marginalized in mainstream culture. And if it is true that mainstream culture is not heterosexual, but heterosexist, my syllabus was not much better.

Another of my students, writing about the main character in "Territory," remarked: "It's funny how I naturally assumed that Neil was heterosexual. I wasn't shocked that he was not. I was just not expecting it." In the twelfth week of a diversity course taught by a teacher committed to making lesbian and gay people visible, no student should have been able to say "I was just not expecting it." He was not expecting it because I had not created a course which adequately challenged heterosexist assumptions. After all, we had not had any sustained discussions of sexual relations between women or between men before the twelfth week; the straight "norm" had been clearly established.

Most of the students responded gently, if not positively, to the lesbian and gay characters in these texts; indeed, more than half wrote their final essays on the McCauley novel, many of them treating the gay relationship with as much sensitivity as they treated any other sexual relationship in the course. Although a few students admitted to feeling uncomfortable reading about homosexuals, and two or three moralized briefly in their responses, only one student so vehemently disapproved of lesbian and gay lifestyles that she could not adequately write about the texts: "I did not enjoy reading these stories; in fact I felt . . . repulsed. I do not support or accept homosexuals or lesbians. What they do is their own business, but I do not want to see, hear, and especially read about their sexual encounters. It disgusts me." I cannot blame my course for this student's response, but I do wonder if her response might have been less violent if she had read these texts over the course of a couple

of months, given time to think about each one before reading another.

In light of these considerations, I tried hard not to isolate all of our discussions of sexual affiliation during the following semester. Although I kept *The Object of My Affection* as the last text of the course, I did not precede it with lesbian or gay stories. Instead, I placed John Cheever's straight story, "Goodbye, My Brother" before the McCauley novel in order to foreground the themes of familial alienation and brotherly deceit which are present in both texts.

Moreover, earlier in the course, I scheduled discussions of Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" and Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy." Cather is not explicit about Paul's sexual preference, but many students mentioned in class that they thought he might be gay and that Cather was writing about the loneliness and despair of a young gay man in a working class community. Singer's story of cross-dressing and marriage between two women resulted in--all hell breaking loose. The discussion was one of the liveliest and most provocative of the semester. Students tried to answer questions like: What constitutes a person's sexual preference? If clothes can make the man or the woman, what does it mean to be a man or to be a woman? And, was Avigdor in love with Yentl when he thought *she* was a *man*--was Hadass still in love with Yentl when she found out *he* was a *woman*?

One of the things I learned during my first year of teaching this course is that we construct a reality for our students. The selection and arrangement of texts creates a world which they will experience and reflect on. And so, we must ask ourselves what kind of a world we are creating: a white world? a heterosexual world? a world in which lesbians and gay men reside only in tiny units--or tiny closets? or a world of cultural, social, and sexual diversity?

If we choose to construct a reality which represents the true diversity of our culture, we have a responsibility to include representations of lesbian and gay life. For most of our students, the texts we choose will be the first lesbian or gay texts they have read. For many, they will be the only ones they will ever read. Therefore, we must decide what kinds of representations of lesbians and gay men we will choose: Will we show students the lesbian and gay experience of alienation, rejection, and oppression? Or will we offer them a glimpse of a world where a person's sexual preference is not always made to impede personal happiness and fulfillment?

Our choice of texts will be one factor influencing the nature of student responses to lesbians and gay men. Of course, there are a number of other factors at work here, but my purpose today is not to explore all of these factors or to describe all of the possible student reactions. I do, however, want to suggest a relationship between the kinds of texts we choose and the kinds of student responses we receive. We can identify two paradigmatic responses: elimination and absorption. Elimination

is likely to be expressed by this sort of sentiment: "I'll never understand how a person can be attracted to someone of his or her own sex. This has nothing to do with my life--period." Absorption might sound like this: "Gee, these people are just like me." If we choose texts that emphasize the struggles, the anger, the pain that lesbians and gay men experience, we are introducing most of our students to a world which is probably unlike their own. On the other hand, if we choose texts that emphasize the ways in which lesbians and gay men mate for life, happily interact with their families, and go to the laundromat, we may be teaching our students that lesbians and gay men are just like the straight majority.

Each of these choices can be valuable as well as problematic. A text which foregrounds the oppression experienced by lesbians and gay men, as well as the pain and loneliness and hopelessness which can result from this oppression, presents an accurate picture of one dimension of lesbian and gay lives. And, just as students need to learn about the experiences of blacks and Asians and Latinos in a racist culture, they need to learn about the experiences of lesbians and gay men in a homophobic culture. But such a picture of alienation and despair can be dangerous because it might reinforce the myth that one cannot be lesbian or gay and live happily in our society. This message gratifies those who see homosexuals as dysfunctional members of our society and it threatens lesbian and gay readers with a dismal fate. That is, if you come out, life will get worse and not better. If we teach the literature of lesbian and gay

despair, we must connect this despair to the oppressions which cause it. Otherwise, we are teaching homophobia.

An assimilationist text is very different; although it may include descriptions of oppression and loneliness, it will emphasize the potential for a lesbian or gay man to live happily in the straight culture. It will valorize the ordinariness (read: heterosexualness) of the homosexual.

A typical element in such a text is a long-term lesbian or gay relationship that can too easily be called a "marriage." Quite a few of our students will accept such a relationship because it is familiar, because it suggests that homosexuals are like heterosexuals. And, just as long as lesbians and gay men are like everyone else, maybe they're not so bad. This reading of a lesbian or gay "marriage," however, erases the differences between a legally sanctioned and socially ritualized arrangement and a relationship that is still illegal in most states, rejected by most religious groups, and anathematized by most people in this country. A lesbian or gay "marriage" can never be "just like" a straight marriage.

And, notice, the comparison always runs in one direction; students will write, as several of mine did, "This story made me realize how much a homosexual man is like myself." Almost never will a straight student admit that she or he is like a lesbian or gay man--that a straight couple might model their relationship on a lesbian or gay union, or better yet, that straight couples, as well as lesbian and gay couples, might shape their relationships based on a model of "marriage" defined not by gender arrangements

but by human connection. Most students' comparisons maintain the primacy of the straight model and deny the possibility of other models. They do not celebrate diversity; they sacrifice diversity to assimilation. To suggest that two men or two women can have a kind of marriage is to be flexible; to suggest that there are alternatives to the marriage model itself is to be revolutionary. After all, why do we read literature from outside the mainstream culture in the first place--to learn to appreciate the variety of human experiences and perspectives, or to search out only the similarities between Others and Self?

Many of you will say that I'm being harsh, that, considering our cultural norms, it is indeed an accomplishment to move a straight 20-year old American man to admit that a gay man is like himself. Furthermore, you might argue that students will compare lesbian and gay reality to straight reality because straight reality is what most of them know best. And, of course, you're right. I am not saying that the straight student's impulse to assimilate lesbians and gay men is a corrupt impulse; it is merely an impulse that needs to be examined further.

This semester as I am teaching "Man and Woman in Literature" for the third time, I find myself bringing these issues into the classroom more and more. By making the course itself a text for us to examine, I have been able to identify and discuss with my students assimilationist, as well as separatist, points of view as they are voiced in the class. In other words, I ask my students many of the same questions I have been raising for us here today. What my students and I are learning together is that

these questions are not easily answered--that one cannot take an assimilationist or separatist position without denying part of the whole picture. At the beginning of this talk, I offered an appropriately pre-luncheon definition of assimilation--the change of digested food into the protoplasm of an animal. These days, my students and I aren't just trying to identify the food, we're looking for a new animal.